

Message Text

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ACTION AF-06

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FM AMCONSUL ASMARA

TO AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY

INFO SECSTATE WASHDC 3637

AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA

C O N F I D E N T I A L ASMARA 0876

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT ET

SUBJECT: ERITREAN ARRESTS AND FOOD SITUATION

REF: A. LONDON 15770 B. ASMARA 836 C. ASMARA 791

1. CONGEN REFERS LONDON TO REF B WHICH REPORTED ARREST OF MRS. ABEBA TESFAGIORGHIS AND REF C WHICH REPORTED INCREASINGLY CRITICAL FOOD SITUATION IN ERITREA.

2. IT WOULD BE INACCURATE AND PREMATURE TO DESCRIBE EPMG FOOD POLICY IN ERITREA TO BE "STARVATION CAMPAIGN." BASIC FOOD ITEMS ARE IN INCREASINGLY SHORT SUPPLY IN ASMARA MARKET, ALTHOUGH SOME ITEMS ARE REPORTED TO BE IN ADEQUATE SUPPLY IN EPMG-CONTROLLED WAREHOUSES IN ASMARA. RATIONING OF SUGAR, WHEAT, SORGHUM AND TEFF, BEGUN SEPT. 17, THOUGH HAMPERED BY BUREAUCRATIC INADEQUACY, IS BEING CARRIED OUT. EVEN IF ONE OBTAINS RATION BOOK, RECENT EXPERIENCE HAS BEEN THAT ITEMS ARE FREQUENTLY NOT AVAILABLE. DISTRIBUTION OF RELIEF SUPPLIES HAS BEEN SUSPENDED SINCE JUNE, ALTHOUGH OVER 3,000 TONS OF SUCH AID IS KNOWN TO BE IN ASMARA WAREHOUSES.

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3. CONGEN HAS CLOSELY MONITORED THREATENING EPMG ACTION AGAINST GRAIN HARVEST IN ERITREA. THINLY VEILED THREAT WARNING ERITREANS TO BEWARE OF "BANDITS" DRESSED IN EPMG UNIFORMS WHO WILL BURN HARVEST IN FIELD, ORIGINALLY BROADCAST ON RADIO ASMARA IN LATE SEPTEMBER, WAS REPEATED AGAIN IN BROADCAST TO POPULACE BY BG GETACHEW, MARTIAL LAW ADMINISTRATOR OF ERITREAN REGION, ON OCT. 13 AND 14. TO DATE, CONGEN HAS RECEIVED ONLY TWO CONFIRMED REPORTS OF MINOR EPMG DESTRUCTION OF CROPS IN ERITREA. IT APPEARS THAT EPMG POLICY IS TO DENY FOOD TO INSURGENTS BY MAKING AVAILABLE ONLY MARGINAL AMOUNTS TO LOCAL POPULACE THROUGH RIGID CONTROL OF DISTRIBUTION.

4. MRS. ABEBA TESFAGIORGHIS, AFTER 16 DAYS DETENTION UNDER AUSTERE CONDITIONS, WAS ABLE TO WRITE TO HUSBAND MESFUN HAILU OCT. 15. SHE SAID SHE WAS IN GOOD HEALTH ALTHOUGH SHE WAS SUBJECTED TO DAILY INTERROGATION. EPMG AUTHORITIES ARE CLAIMING SHE WAS COLLABORATING WITH INSURGENTS, THOUGH NO FORMAL CHARGES HAVE BEEN BROUGHT AND THERE IS NO INDICATION THAT A TRIAL IS CONTEMPLATED IN NEAR FUTURE. LOCAL SOURCE REPORTS SHE IS WIDELY BELIEVED TO HAVE BEEN INVOLVED IN COLLECTION AND DISTRIBUTION OF MONEY FOR INSURGENTS UNDER GUISE OF HER COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES. CONGEN HAS NO WAY OF JUDGING ACCURACY OF SUCH REPORTS.

5. EMBASSY ADDIS MAY WISH TO COMMENT ON EFFORTS MADE TO DATE TO BRING ISSUE OF ERITREAN FOOD CRISIS TO ATTENTION OF VOLAG REPS RESIDENT IN ADDIS.

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